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Research Materials/Source Documents
AWARDS & DECORATIONS

FILE TITLE: Air Force Cross Recipient: A1C Charles D. McGrath

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The hoist had been shot out of action. Nothing for the two men in the underbrush to do but watch as the *Jolly Green* left without them.

AIC Chuck McGrath was lonesome.

He wasn't alone, but he was lonesome. Hundreds of enemy troops filling the air with bullets weren't really much company. Nor could he talk to Capt. Lynn D. Aikman, the injured F-4 pilot he had come to rescue. Aikman was hurting badly. Besides, chatter might give their position away.

The going had been rough on this rescue from the start, but Pararescueman McGrath almost had success in his flight suit pocket.

McGrath had signaled to the HH-53 rescue helicopter overhead to lower the penetrator, which would haul the two men up to safety.

"We can't use the hoist!" came the bad news from Flight Engineer Sgt. George Wright. "It's frozen up. All the lines to the system have been shot out."

Another helicopter would have to come for McGrath and Aikman. Now there was nothing to do but wait. And hope.

It was June 1972, in Southeast Asia. The big air war was on, and there was a lot of business for Chuck McGrath and all the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery crews based in Thailand.

The Aikman rescue mission had begun with the dispatch of two HH-53s. One of them developed trouble. Then the other, the bird McGrath was on, had a malfunction and diverted to Udorn. Problems solved, it took off again.

Another chopper, this one from Nakhon Phanom, rendezvoused with them for the rescue mission.

On the way north, the HH-53 *Super Jolly Green Giant* refueled from *King Bird*, an HC-130 tanker.

Now everything was set. The *Jolly Greens* had M-60 machine guns along for double duty: to back up the three 7.62 mini-guns, and to cover the flight engineer while he's in the door during the rescue (you have to pull the mini-gun out of the way).

At the initial holding point, the

LOOK OF THE RISH

by Sgt. JERRY W. KENNEDY

April 1974

rescue crews learned that Aikman was injured. Pararescueman McGrath knew that he would have to go down, so he got his gear ready. The hoist and the penetrator used for pickups in the dense jungle had to be just right.

Making contact was tricky. They kept getting false beepers.

"The enemy was using captured radios, trying to lure us in," McGrath explained later. Finally, the A-1E *Skyriders* (Sandys), who would supply escort cover for the rescue, got through to Aikman. Using their radio beacon directionfinders, they made several passes over the area and got a pretty good fix on his position.

Now it was Rescue's turn. They would have to pinpoint the downed pilot's position and go get him.

"We knew the area was bad," McGrath recalls. "There were a lot of villages around, and you never knew what to expect. You'd see trucks along the road underneath the trees."

The chopper moved in close. The crew still couldn't see Aikman on the ground, so they asked him to pop his smoke. At first, the smoke flare was invisible in the jungle below. Then McGrath saw it at the seven o'clock position.

They were making a tight right turn. "Chuck! Pick it up across the tail—pick it up as we go by."

McGrath called it out again. Then the pilot, Maj. Leo Thacker, called it (the smoke) for as long as he could see it. As the chopper's tail swung around, the flight engineer began calling it.

Hovering, the rescue crew took a good look at the lay of the land. "It was a tight ravine, a small hill at one end, open at the other, and well-worn down in the middle," McGrath said. "Trails wound along the bottom of the ravine. Sitting smack dab where we wanted to go was a tree, about three feet in diameter and about 140 feet tall. It had an immense crown."

Aikman was there.

"I'm under my parachute, underneath a big tree," he radioed.

The men in the *Super Jolly Green* still couldn't see him.

"I knew I had to go down and find him," McGrath said. He and his teammate readied the penetrator. You can't make it down through the dense forests of Southeast Asia without it. McGrath strapped himself to the penetrator and began his descent. Earthward bound, McGrath spun around and around. "There was so much noise I don't really know whether they were shooting at me right then or not," he said.

McGrath looked down over the tangle of bamboo stalks, each more than an inch thick. Now he could see what hadn't been visible from the copter: part of Aikman's parachute, in the bushes about 60 feet away.

McGrath crunched down into the primeval vegetation, which promptly swallowed him. Upside down in the bamboo thicket, he called to the flight engineer to pull him back up so that he could get himself untangled.

Back up through the bamboo he went.

"I thought it was going to pull me off the seat," he recalled. "I was just hoping I could hold on. I knew the strap would hold, but something had to break. I wondered if it would be my neck!"

The bamboo, not McGrath, finally broke. He climbed off the penetrator and crawled along the ground. Then he caught his first glimpse of Aikman, about 10 feet away.

The pilot was sprawled on his back and holding his radio. All his gear was scattered around. McGrath told the *Jolly Green* crew where he was.

The chopper's roar was a welcome sound, but along with it came a new problem. The rotor was kicking up a 70-knot wind, knocking branches out of trees. The falling limbs were six or seven inches thick. They made things miserable on the ground.

"I was really worried about getting hit by those limbs," McGrath

said. "I figured the last thing we needed was to have two injured people down there."

At last, McGrath reached Aikman. "His knee was so dislocated that it looked as if his whole leg had been moved up," McGrath said. "His right elbow was also injured."

A king-size battle was still rocking the area. The men on the ground heard the staccato chatter of the mini-guns. The sound of enemy AK-47s was distinct above the bedlam.

"I could also hear the M-16s going off, so I figured something had happened to one of the mini-guns," McGrath said. Later he learned that some of the first rounds to hit the helicopter had knocked out the electrical system that powered the left mini-gun. The enemy seemed to be everywhere. McGrath called in their position to one of the *Skyriders*.

"I'm coming in hot—20 mike mike and mini-gun," the A-1E pilot responded.

The *Skyriders* strafed both ridges close to where McGrath and Aikman lay. It was time to get out of there. More obstacles confronted them, however. The flight engineer couldn't get the penetrator down past the big tree to pick them up.

McGrath had to move Aikman down a steep slope overgrown with brush. It would be painful for the pilot, but there was no other choice. McGrath dragged him 120 feet through the dense underbrush.

"The longer we waited, the worse it was going to get," McGrath said. "I knew we had to move then. We had to go." McGrath wasn't thinking about anything but getting Aikman down to where they could both be picked up.

"I really didn't even worry about getting shot," he said. "I figured if I'm going to get shot, then I'm going to get shot. If I'm not, I'm not," McGrath recalled.

As McGrath got into position, he received word about the hoist.

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McGrath popped some smoke to
make sure the Sandys and the other
HH-53s knew their position. He
didn't get much red smoke, but it
was probably just as well. "The
guys would have had a better
target to shoot at. Fortunately,
they weren't pinging around me.
They were concentrating on the
chopper."

Within minutes, another chopper
came in, this one a Nakhon Phan-
om bird. The penetrator lowered,
and McGrath got Aikman ready.

"I got us strapped on and pulled
on the cable to signal that we were
ready." As they rose toward the
rescue bird, McGrath could see the
engineer standing in the door. It
was SSgt. Richard Simon, "a big
guy with a cheerful face," Mc-
Grath recalled. "I could just see
that big head hanging out. He
didn't budge, not a bit."

The guns continued the heated
exchange as McGrath and Aikman
came level with the bottom of the
aircraft.

"I could see the holes opening
up in the side of the aircraft. Ping,
ping, ping, right up the side," Mc-
Grath said.

"Simon still didn't move. Final-
ly, they got us to the top and
reached to pull us in. We almost
got into the helicopter when all of
a sudden we swung back out."

Another PJ, TSgt. Dennis Reich,
had been helping to get them
aboard and now he was hit. Within
seconds, however, a combat pho-
tographer, SSgt. Kelly Schuman,
jumped to operate the hoist while
Simon pulled McGrath and Aikman
in.

They had made it. But Mc-
Grath's work had only just begun.
He unhooked and saw Reich lying
motionless. "I pulled off his mask,
and he opened his eyes," McGrath
said. He noted that Reich had been
hit in the leg and the bullet had
shattered the bone. "I took the
tourniquet out of the survival vest
and put it on real quick. It was

precautionary, because there was a
lot of blood coming out."

Aikman was still on the penetra-
tor on the floor and he wanted off.
McGrath checked him over and
gave him some water.

Sgt. Mike Nunes, the tail gunner,
Schuman, and McGrath put the two
men on stretchers.

Nunes worked on Reich and
McGrath stayed with Aikman.

"He [Aikman] was coherent. He
could talk even though he was in
shock. He didn't want anything for
the pain. He could breathe O.K.,
even though he had a few loose
teeth in the back of his mouth,"
the PJ said.

McGrath checked Aikman's leg
wounds and put on a pressure band-
age. He also tried to apply a
pneumatic splint, but it wouldn't
stay inflated. An AK-47 round had
penetrated the medical kit and gone
through the middle of the bundle
of splints.

"When I checked his feet, I saw
a little hole in his boot. It turned
out he'd been shot right through
the top of his foot. The bullet came
out the bottom. He told me later
it happened as we reached the bot-
tom of the door. I thought that was
ironic. Here he is, with all this
other stuff wrong with him, and
we're sitting right together. My
legs are behind him and his legs are
behind me but he gets shot in the
foot and I don't get a scratch,"
McGrath said.

On the way home, the helicopter
pilot, Capt. Dave Stovall, had to
decide whether to put in at Udorn
or fly back to Nakhon Phanom. If
he picked Udorn, they wouldn't be
able to fly back to NKP without
bringing a whole maintenance crew
over to Udorn.

"They needed the helicopters
badly because of all the missions
going on," McGrath said. The de-
cision was up to McGrath to make
on the basis of Aikman's condition.

He decided on NKP. Still, their
troubles weren't over. They ran
into rough weather just before they
went in. "You can't do anything
about the weather," McGrath said.

"That's when we really started
getting apprehensive. Aikman
started slipping into shock. We got
in O.K. and as soon as we landed
they took him to the hospital. I
kept checking his pulse. He came
to pretty quick."

For McGrath, it had been "one
of those days that you hear about,
but never think you'll be involved
in," as he put it.

"I guess I was lucky."

By and large, Chuck McGrath
makes his own luck. He had decid-
ed early in his Air Force career to
become a PJ. Then during training,
he met an attractive airman named
Candy. They were married on May
1, and two weeks later Chuck left
for Southeast Asia.

He was assigned to Udorn, and
in mid-July, Candy was sent to
Korat, also in Thailand. Chuck
didn't get to see her right away. He
had been shot down on a mission
in northern Laos, and had rolled
down the side of a mountain in the
crashing chopper. But he made it.

Sergeant McGrath never
dreamed he would receive the Air
Force Cross for his rescue of Cap-
tain Aikman. Nor did he suspect
that the Air Force Sergeants Asso-
ciation would choose him to re-
ceive the Pitsenbarger Heroism
Award, the Association's highest.
McGrath is the fourth recipient of
the award, named for a parares-
cueman, A1C William H. Pitsen-
barger, who sacrificed his life on
a rescue mission.

Jonelle McGrath, born last sum-
mer, may know when she grows up
that her daddy is a reluctant hero.
But Chuck McGrath was doing the
job he chose to do, saving lives,
and he just did the best he could.
"Your only goal is to get in and
out in one piece—that's the only
thing you really think about."

SSgt. Charles D. McGrath
claims his successes are just "the
luck of the Irish." But men who
were with Charles McGrath in the
war zone know that he is a special
kind of man; one with skill, intelli-
gence, dedication, and—O.K.,
maybe just a little bit of luck. ☐